Apotheoses and Artists: Human Ornaments and Cinema's Dialogue with the Arts. The Kiriki Films of 1907 and 1998

Echle, Evelyn

Evelyn Echle, HFF Postdam-Babelsberg/Universität Zürich

Apotheoses and Artists: Human Ornaments and Cinema's Dialogue with the Arts. The *Kiriki* Films of 1907 and 1998

A close look at cinema's history *in the very beginning at the very end* also tells a story of film's dialogue with the other arts now and then. Throughout, movies have dealt with intermediality in a particular way. Part of this phenomenon is cinema's use of ornamental structures ever since its beginnings.

Around 1900, the ornament was not only highly regarded in the fine arts, in design and European art history (Henry van de Velde, Alois Riegl, Adolf Loos), early cinema also displays a conspicuous tendency towards ornamentation. From stylised décors, *rocaille*-structured frames and intertitles to elaborate scenes of final apotheosis, symmetrical adornments are excessively present in pictorial forms. Not only as an element of decoration, but also as a structural composition the ornament features prominently in early films.

An interesting case in this respect is the enactment of the human ornament, which appears in a great number of early films. Especially in the genre of the artistic film, the exhibition of bodies forming an ornamental structure demonstrates two fundamental dispositions of the new medium: on the one hand *body art* as a visual attraction, and on the other intermedial debates on the visual patterns of the fine arts. What I therefore want to demonstrate in this paper is that cinema from the outset uses its techniques to transform through artifice the spectacle of vaudeville into an intrinsic aesthetic. In this context, a comparison between the two versions of the film *Kiriki* will outline my argument. The first version of 1907 was directed by the Spanish filmmaker Segundo de Chomón who also worked for Méliès as a colourist and later for Pathé. The second film is a remake or rather an *homage* to the earlier production by Philippe Decouflé, a French choreographer and dancer who directed his version of *Kiriki* in 1998.

The focus on the first film of 1907 concerns two aspects: on the one hand the particular cinematographic ornamentation of the human bodies, and on the other the development of the discourse on ornaments in the latter half of the 19th century. As Debra Shafter notes: "Ornament represented the central topic in studies of stylistic development emerging just before the second half of the nineteenth century, since it was perceived as the most conventionalized manifestation of style in architecture and the applied arts."[1]

As a preliminary remark, I would like to point out the tagline of *Kiriki – Les Équilibristes Japonais* – which quotes and caricatures two earlier films in a reflexive mode. The first is *Japanese Acrobats* produced in 1904 by the Edison Manufacturing Company. Ostensibly it presents the same subject matter, but the Edison film features *actual* Japanese acrobats on stage in front of a richly decorated backdrop, performing amazing, real stunts and without any cinematic conjuring.[2]

In *Kiriki* there are also echoes of an early animated film by Georges Méliès. In *L'Équilibre impossible* (1902), Méliès himself performs on stage as a magician. Through double exposure he produces several copies of himself with which he creates a human pyramid. Méliès uses the overhead-shot as a trick just like Chomón does, too. But *Kiriki* is more than just pastiche, it is an ironic persiflage. One may recognize that in the way the group of artists are presented: they only pretend to be Japanese acrobats, while dressed in exaggerated and antiquated kimono style wearing incorrect samurai wigs. In doing so the film evokes the style of the early *films grotesques*, a genre produced serially at the time in Italy and France. It is no coincidence that Pathé played the leading role as production company for this type of film. The artists' performances in *Kiriki* are an act of showing and exhibition, they directly address the audience and solicit the spectator's attention. Thus it is a perfect example of what Tom Gunning calls "the aesthetic of astonishment: "This cinema addresses and holds the spectator, emphasising the act of display. In fulfilling this curiosity, it delivers a generally brief dose of scopic pleasure."[3]

In *Kiriki* the direct address of the spectator not only fragments the several balancing acts but also refers to the medium originating in vaudeville, fairground attractions, panopticons and of course *the circus*. It is particularly suitable for the exhibitionist nature of popular art forms at the time by recalling circus shows with their displays of balancing acts in the form of one and one and one. Hence this example reflects the ontology of cinema itself. Historically, *Kiriki* in its manner of grotesque film fits perfectly to a time of dispositive novelties in the medium: it was the golden age of the so-called *circus cinematographs,* better known as *salon cinematograph*. From 1905 to 1910, spectacular circus tents or big tops were especially erected for film projections while circus directors integrated the cinema in their shows. Therefore films like *Kiriki* perfectly matched the coupling of profilmic and technological sensations with exotic and, at the time, strange cultures as a way of pleasing the audience.

Key stylistic features of Kiriki

Switching from a film historical perspective to an examination of style, the function of the ornamental patterns must be emphasised. The ornamental structure is evident in almost every balancing act; in these moments, patterns of fine-art related compositions can be discerned (fig. 23). The film pauses for a few seconds while the actors form the balancing numbers. Here the moving image turns into a still picture. By definition, lateral symmetry is a basic aspect of the ornamental, and, as is well-known, it also flattens cinematic space. Once more I would like to point out the fine-arts related composition. This tendency is supported by the exclusive use of wide shots, with only one full shot when the artists take a bow. Of course this must be read as a concession to the use of the overhead shot with a fixed camera. But nevertheless it also contrasts with cinematic space, because there is a kind of *spatial dynamic* when the actors take a bow and come onstage or leave it. This changes when the artists form the ornamental structures in front of a black background. In these shots no deep space is visible; there is neither cinematic background nor foreground, only flatness. One can say the human bodies form an ornament in the sense in which Alois Riegl described the phenomenon: as a pattern on a ground.

The final stylistic feature I would like to stress is the frame within the frame. We have two definition lines in *Kiriki*: one is the film frame and the other the artificial one of the *mise-en-scène*. This frame is a useful instrument to define onscreen and offscreen space and, due to the montage, simultaneously helps to hide the

"magic trick" of the overhead shot by making the stage a dynamic space while the spectator sees the artists enter and leave behind this frame in between numbers – in this way the illusion of offscreen space is created.
But this frame in exotic bamboo-look offers still more to analyse: It places each balancing act in an order and serialises the bodies within an entire ornamental composition. While the artists form geometrical figures, their bodies create a horizontal and vertical axis with a clearly defined centre in the middle of the frame. The viewer is thus cued towards a central point of contemplation.

Japonism, the colonial past and primitivism as ornamental legitimacy

The bamboo frame in *Kiriki* is yet another persiflage device of the film's irony. In my opinion, Segundo de Chomón regards the bamboo frame with its primitive construction as a persiflage because of the japonism *en vogue* at the time. The term defines the influence of Japanese art on that of the occident. From the 1860s, Japanese wood-block prints became a source of inspiration for many artists in France and other western countries. They were especially affected by the lack of perspective and shadow, the flat areas of strong colour, the compositional freedom with mostly low diagonal lines in the background.[4] *Kiriki* simply reverses this alleged novelty: by displaying an old-fashioned group of artists with exaggerated costumes and makeup, japonism is represented as completely antiquated and even primitive. I assume that this could be read as a commentary on the discourse of ethnography and anthropology around 1900 which reanimated the category of the primitive as a subject of synchronic social analysis. As David L. Hoyt points out:

> *The metaphor of the primitive was, in the social evolutionary heydays of the 1870s and 1880s, suitably archaeological, and, to a lesser extent, geological. In either case, the primitive was inert. Like fossil or artifactual remains, it was a prior stage that had been surpassed in the unilinear course of human progress.*[5]

This *link of the primitive to the ornament* has to be kept in mind in my subsequent comparison of the use of ornamentation in *Kiriki* with the ideas of theorist Adolf Loos. Coincidence or not, *Kiriki* was produced one year before Loos' famous polemical lecture *Ornament and Crime*. In this manifesto, he declared that lack of decoration is the sign of an advanced society. He argued that ornament is economically inefficient and "morally degenerate." In his opinion the omission of ornament was a sign of progress:

> *Those who measure everything by the past impede the cultural development of nations and of humanity itself. Ornament is not merely produced by criminals, it commits a crime by damaging national economy and therefore its cultural development. [...]. Ornament can no longer be borne by someone who exits at our level of culture.*[6]

However, Loos made two exceptions for the use of the ornamental: if it depended on the category of the feminine and on the primitive, it is acceptable: "The Papuan tattoos his skin, his boat, his oat, in short everything that is within his reach. He is no criminal. The modern man who tattoos himself is a criminal or a degenerate."[7]
Loos' polemical text must be considered in the context of discourses around the turn of the century which influenced academic disciplines such as physical anthropology or ethnography. The opposition of the "civilised-us" and the "exotic-Other" was also demonstrated in so-called ethnographic and colonial fairs,[8] and the triad of taste, race, and civilisation was not exclusive to Loos' writings. These connections were common in natural history and the scientific discourses on man. As Jimena Canales notes:

> *The qualities of superfluous (Überflüssig), degenerate (Entartung) and criminal (Verbrechen) were identified with ornament simultaneously in natural history, medicine, criminal anthropology and architectural and aesthetic theory. In the late nineteenth century ornament became the preferred boundary between the normal and the pathological, and between the functional and the arbitrary, in art and architecture alike.*[9]

In its own special way, *Kiriki* links the ornament with the category of the primitive, too. But the crucial point is that it does so through irony.

Circus, Cinema and Fakery

In this final section, I will range from the beginning of the century to the present by comparing Philippe Decouflé's *Kiriki* with Chomón's earlier version. What we find in the contemporary version is surprising: the discourse of the circus as cinematic device and precursor of filmic history is still current. But the artists' world has changed from the exotic discourse of modernity to the realm of the *cirque nouveau* or *modern circus*, with influences as much from contemporary culture as from circus history.

The dramatic composition remains the same in the *Kiriki* of 1998: artists creating a human pyramid through cinematic fakery. Due to technical developments the overhead shot is now virtually invisible, particularly as Decouflé mixes "real" acrobatic scenes with fake ones.

But the most impressive aspect is the exhibitionist gesture which the film blithely derives from the cinema of attractions. Decouflé makes the artists look more like comedians – or at least some of them, such as the man with the jug ears (fig. 24) – who seek contact with the camera and transform their bodies into ornamental figures. Once again, there is the enthusiasm for the popular arts, with movement playing the key role of communication, perfected by the very physical actors forming the ornamental structures. The specific aesthetic of the video surface in this example would be worth a closer look, but to put succinctly: this is the major difference of this version compared to the *Kiriki* of 1907, leading to an altered visual poetics of the surface.

To conclude, *Kiriki* demonstrates through its numerous quotations of other films a *reflection of* the short history of cinema, using filmic means to achieve a particular illusion, for instance through the overhead shot or the editing. In my opinion it is especially the *ironic stance* which is remarkable; both versions use irony in their use of the discourses of other arts, namely popular forms such as the circus, but also the fine arts. Thus the ornament functions as an instrument of intermediality, and this has not changed from 1907 to 1998. Usually scholarship pronounces the ornament to be the chief antagonist of modernity, such as Loos and other turn-of-the-century European critics. The ornament represented the primitive and therefore stood in regressive opposition to the clean lines and functional beauty of the modern.[10] Cinema simply reversed this notion: as modernity's dominant form of popular visual culture, it presented the ornament in films like *Kiriki* as a stylistic and semantic device. And as such, the ornament became an object of film's intrinsic aesthetic.

Illustrations

23. *Kiriki* (S. de Chomón, 1907).

24. *Kiriki* (P. Decouflé, 1998).

Notes

[1] D. Shafter, *The Order of Ornament, the Structure of Style. Theoretical Foundations of Modern Art and Architecture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, p. 2.

[2] The *mise-en-scène* here is remarkable: The ornate backdrop is a highly stylised decor in the manner of European landscape painting around 1800 which strongly contrasts the evidently "exotic" ethnicity of the artists. Hence it deals with the emerging discourses of ethnography and anthropology around 1900, as also negotiated in *Kiriki*, as suggested later.

[3] T. Gunning, *An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator*, in L. Williams (ed.), *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 1994, p. 121.

[4] Japanese art consisted of off-centred arrangements without perspective, light without shadows, and vibrant colours on plane surfaces. J. Stanley-Baker, *Japanese Art*, Thames & Hudson, London 2000.

[5] D. L. Hoyt, "The Reanimation of the Primitive. Fin-de-siècle Ethnographic Discourse in Western Europe," in *History of Science*, vol. 39, no. 125, 2001, pp. 331-354.

[6] A. Loos, *Ornament and Crime* (1908), in B. Miller, M. Ward (eds.), *Crime and Ornament. The Arts and Popular Culture in the Shadow of Adolf Loos*, YYZ Books, Toronto 2002, p. 32.

[7] *Idem*, p. 29.

[8] The millions of visitors attending these exhibitions were motivated by voyeurism, sensationalism and the encounter with the other.

[9] J. Canales, A. Herscher, "Criminal Skins. Tattoos and Modern Architecture in the Work of Adolf Loos," in *Architectural History*, vol. 48, 2005, p. 251.

[10] R. Galt, *Between the Ornament and the Corpse, Adolf Loos and Classical Film Theory*, in T. Trifonova (ed.), *European Film Theory*, Routledge, New York 2009, pp. 195-210.